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TAGA SPORTS

JULY 2011

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COVER ART
Joshua Jones at the Francisco "Tan Ko" M. Palacios Ballfield.

Photography by
JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

Whew! Four editions later and we're nearly full circle with Volume 1 of TAGA *Sports* since coming out with the first edition in October last year. The sports we've featured since then have ranged the gamut from triathlon to football and all manners of island sports in between.

In this July-September edition, we shine the spotlight on the most popular island sport yet—baseball, with a Q&A on Page 14 featuring Joshua Jones, arguably the best pitcher the CNMI has right now. On Page 20, we take a look at the powerhouse that is the Saipan Little League and the simply amazing way its been churning out winners after winners.

The fast-rising sport of badminton also gets a piece of the action on Page 8, with particular focus on the sport's unexpected benefit—the way it has changed the lives of individuals and its cohesive power to build strong bonds in a diverse community. Bowling's Robert Talavera, meanwhile, claims on Page 18 to be the luckiest dude yet with his five perfect games (Don't you believe it!), while Mark Ma on Page 22 demolishes his opponents with dazzling displays of power on the ping-pong table.

And have you heard of Zumba yet? The latest fitness craze to hit the world is forcing men and women of all ages to rediscover their hips. Never mind if you have two left feet; the point is to get you moving and dancing. Check out Page 12 and find out why Zumba is the hottest topic around water coolers these days!

For those who're thinking of getting a bicycle, we feature on Page 4 the two bike shops on island, while Page 6 outlines what your options are if you want to start biking to work to save the planet. It features safety tips, the accessories you'll need, and how to safely navigate and share the road with cars.

We were wrapping up this edition when the Dallas Mavericks upended the much heralded Miami Heat in game six of the NBA Finals to take home the Larry O'Brien Trophy, so of course we couldn't let that historic win go without a nod to power forward Dirk Nowitzki on Page 24. Yey, go Dallas!

Again, for comments, violent reactions, criticisms, and suggestions for future issues, don't hesitate to shoot us an email at editor@saipantribune.com and we'd be sure to consider them in future editions of the magazine.

JAYVEE VALLEJERA
editor@saipantribune.com
Editor

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TAGA SPORTS

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WRITERS BLOC

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND
Walter has been on Saipan for just over a year and a half and has been fortunate enough to cover Saipan sports, while traveling to neighboring islands of Tinian and Rota. He covered the 2010 CNMI Little League District Tournament on Tinian and this year's Little League district tourney on Rota. He is also looking forward to covering the upcoming International Fishing Derby for the first time this summer.

CATHERINE ROSARIO PERRY
Catherine Rosario Perry's earliest taste of Latin dancing was tangoing with the ring boy at a wedding reception when she was about 8. At least, that's what they attempted. Since then, her hip swaying has been largely limited to the structured regimen of Carolinian *bwai* (women's dance) and forays into hula, although she does not rule out the possibility of someday cutting loose with Zumba, the focus of her article.

CLARISSA V. DAVID
Clarissa David owns several running apparel and pairs of running shoes only for posterity. She did run either on Beach Road or along the American Memorial Park pathway eons ago, back when she still had the luxury of time. Nowadays, she calls climbing up and down the *Saipan Tribune* and TAGA *Sports* office stairs or walking to and from her car her "exercise."

MARK RABAGO
Mark Rabago learned to ride a bike in one of those rent-a-bike stalls at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. There was also a summer during his childhood while vacationing in Parañaque that all he did was bike. He would like to relive that experience again and is looking to purchase a bike. Mark first took up bowling in high school when it was part of his physical education class. He still has fond memories of playing duckpin at the old YMCA Manila at the back of the Manila City Hall.

ROSELYN MONROYO
Roselyn and Tony Rogolifoi have the same first love: basketball. She used to hide the knob of the family's black-and-white TV set so she could watch the Philippine Basketball Association games at night. Her passion for basketball influenced her choice to pursue a career in sports writing. When she's done with sports writing, she hopes she can still get involved in basketball or any other sports, either as a records keeper or events coordinator.

BackTALK

The TAGA *Sports* magazine was great. One small error, however: In the story on Tony Satur, the story said he and his team of fast-pitch softball players represented the CNMI. The CNMI was not created until 1976. The softball team was representing Micronesia. with Palauans, Carolinians, Chamorros, Pohnpeians, and Chuukese on the team. **DR. KURT BARNES, via e-mail**

Email letters to the editor to editor@saipantribune.com or mail to PMB 34, P.O. Box 10001, Saipan MP 96950. Submissions to TAGA *Sports* must include the writer's name, village address (no P.O. boxes), and daytime phone or mobile number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published or used in any medium. All submissions become the property of the publication and will not be returned.

Get bike, will travel

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

As more and more residents on Saipan fall in love with biking, it is good to know that they can depend on not only one but two bike shops to cater to their needs.

One of the stores has been operating 10 years now, while the newest business opened only in April.

Saipan Bike Pro is located in Chalan Kiya along Middle Road and primarily sells Cannondale, Giant, and GT bikes.

Owner Romeo Lanuza started the company in early 2001. His bikes range in price from $360 to $1,200, depending on the make and the performance expected from the units.

For beginners, Lanuza recommends the lower-priced GT brand in case their interest in biking wanes. That way, they won't be left with a $360 doorstopper.

For intermediate riders, a Giant bike would be ideal as its performance is a notch higher than that of a GT bike. The lighter frame and sleeker design, however, costs between $500 and $700.

For more serious bikers who are into racing, nothing beats a Cannondale, according to Lanuza. As in all things, the difference is always in the performance as the more expensive the bike the better its performance, he said, and Cannondale bikes are renowned for top-of-the-line quality.

Lanuza also advises bike enthusiasts not to buy their bikes piecemeal. He said upgrading parts is always expensive and besides, bicycle manufacturers nowadays produce bikes that are already spruced up.

Aside from carrying replacement parts for all the brands they sell, Saipan Bike Pro also offers three-month free service for customers.

Penny pinchers may also acquire their rides via layaway. However, from two months, Lanuza said he has shortened the layaway period to just 30 days.

A newcomer in the island's bike retail scene is Ride NMI, located across the Mobil gas station along Middle Road in Garapan. Bike mechanic Noel Altamirano said the store only opened in April and is owned by Japanese businessman Hiro Kuwabara.

Ride NMI also sells Giant and Cannondale bikes but it also carries fancier models like De Rosa, used by professional cyclists in world-famous cycling events like the Tour de France.

CONTACT INFO
BIKE PRO: 235-9037
RIDE NMI 233-1616

The store also carries makes like Trek and Jamis. The latter is its least expensive bike, retailing for $420, while the most expensive is the De Rosa at a stratospheric $3,950.

Ride NMI also sells bike parts and accessories and offers customers a three-month warranty on labor for purchases.

Tim Blumenthal, a bicycle expert and president of People for Bikes, a national campaign to gather support of bicycling in the United States, offers this simple advice about buying a bicycle.

"If you're an absolute newcomer to bicycling, there's no good reason to spend more than $600 to $700 on a bike, because you don't know what you like yet," he said. "Go into a bike store, spend $350 on a nice bike and buy a helmet."

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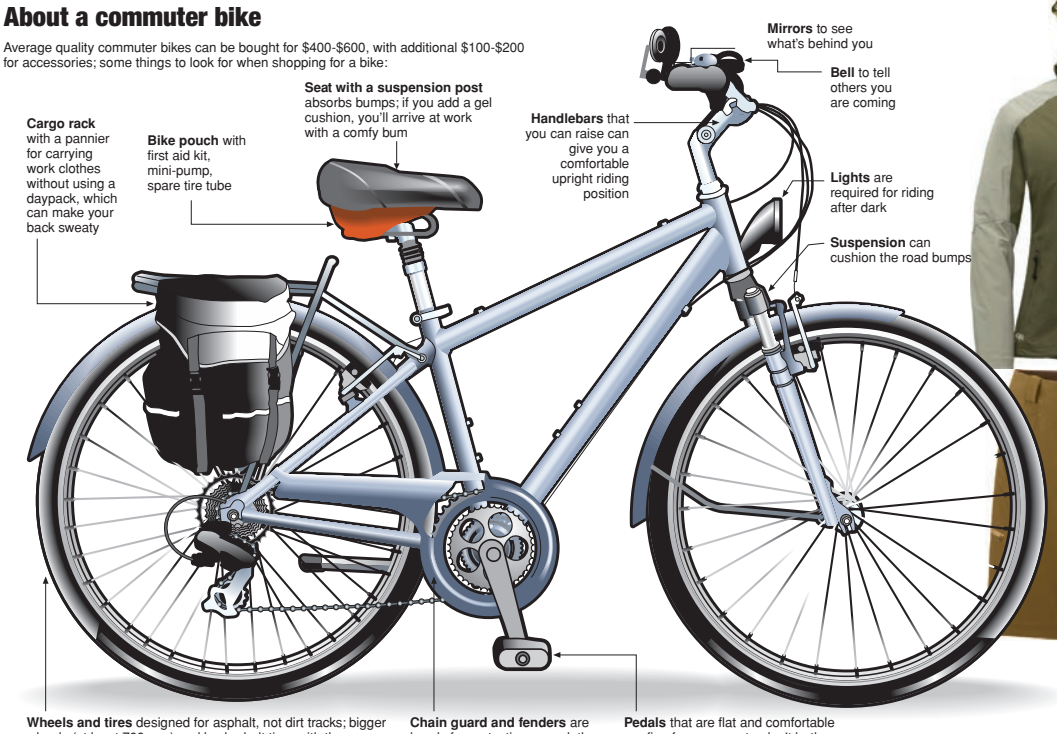
BIKE TO WORK

The advantages are obvious: Burn calories, save money on gas, avoid wear on your car. But can you really bike to work? More people are every year, and here are some tips for making your ride comfortable and safe should you decide to make biking a regular means of commuting:

About a commuter bike

Average quality commuter bikes can be bought for $400-$600, with additional $100-$200 for accessories; some things to look for when shopping for a bike:



Cargo rack with a pannier for carrying work clothes without using a daypack, which can make your back sweaty

Bike pouch with first aid kit, mini-pump, spare tire tube

Seat with a suspension post absorbs bumps; if you add a gel cushion, you'll arrive at work with a comfy bum

Handlebars that you can raise can give you a comfortable upright riding position

Mirrors to see what's behind you

Bell to tell others you are coming

Lights are required for riding after dark

Suspension can cushion the road bumps

Wheels and tires designed for asphalt, not dirt tracks; bigger wheels (at least 700 mm) and kevlar-belt tires with thorn-resistant, self-sealing tubes reduce the chances of flats

Chain guard and fenders are handy for protecting your clothes from splash and grease

Pedals that are flat and comfortable are fine for a commute; don't bother with toe clips

Gearing up

You don't have to have the best gear for a commuter ride, but these will make you more comfortable

Helmet Essential ... seriously ... hair gel at the office can fix the doo

Glasses It's no fun getting bugs and wind in the eyes; consider a second pair with clear lenses for night riding

Synthetic-fiber shirt Bikers don't wear these just for the fashion — spandex doesn't hold moisture, stays light and breathes

Bike gloves Padded for comfort while leaning on the handlebar; also reduce "road rash" if you fall

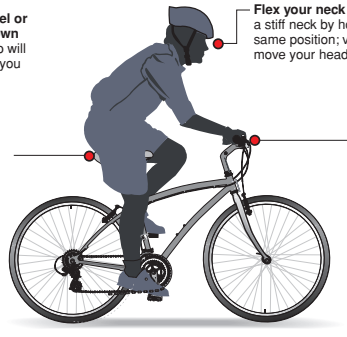
Synthetic-fabric shorts Stay drier than cotton; you don't have to get the skin tight ones; loose fit shorts work just as well, but get ones with pads in the crotch

Bike shoes Shoe laces can get tangled in the gears; bike shoes with a rigid sole will transfer power to the pedals better

Tips for riding in comfort

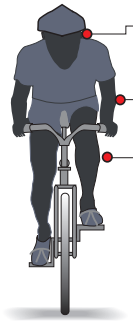
Keep your seat level or pointed slightly down
A seat that points up will put pressure where you don't want it

Don't wait until your crotch hurts to start changing saddle position; make little changes every few minutes



Flex your neck Don't give yourself a stiff neck by holding your head in the same position; vary the angle and move your head, not just your eyes

Don't be stiff Vary the way you hold the handlebars; you can rest your elbows on the bars to give your hands a break; keep your arms loose, your elbows as low as possible



Don't cover both ears Headphones may prevent you from hearing a warning sound

Keep your elbows near your body and slightly bent to be more aerodynamic

Keep your knees above your pedals, not pointing out to the sides, to increase the efficiency of your stroke and reduce stress on the knee

Planning your route

- The best route is not always the shortest; check local maps to find a way that avoids traffic, narrow roads or dangerous intersections
- Useful Web sites
  bikeleague.org
  bikecommute.com
  ommutebybike.com
  kenkifer.com/bikepages/commute

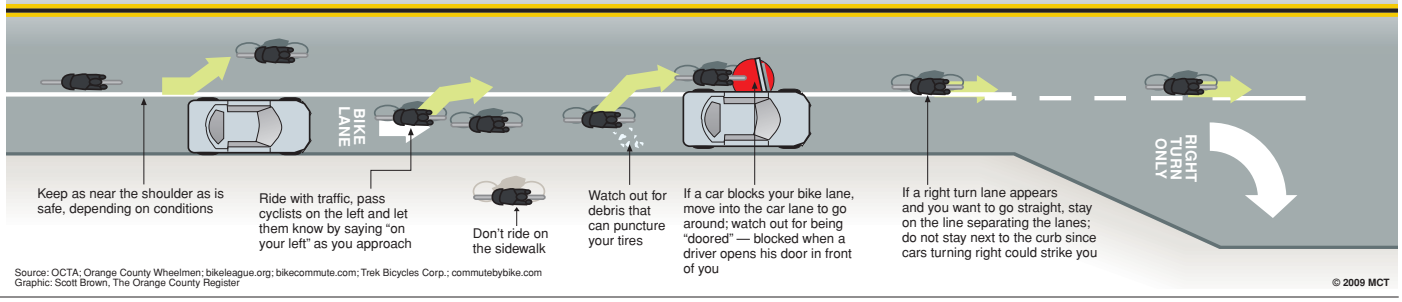
Benefits by the numbers

13 Average pounds (6 kg) lost during the first year of commuting by bike

50% Reduction of risk for heart disease and stroke with as little as three hours of biking per week

60% Percent of auto pollution created in the first few minutes of driving

Safe street riding


BIKE LANE
RIGHT TURN ONLY
Keep as near the shoulder as is safe, depending on conditions
Ride with traffic, pass cyclists on the left and let them know by saying "on your left" as you approach
Don't ride on the sidewalk
Watch out for debris that can puncture your tires
If a car blocks your bike lane, move into the car lane to go around; watch out for being "doored" — blocked when a driver opens his door in front of you
If a right turn lane appears and you want to go straight, stay on the line separating the lanes; do not stay next to the curb since cars turning right could strike you

Source: OCTA; Orange County Wheelmen; bikeleague.org; bikecommute.com; Trek Bicycles Corp.; commutebybike.com
Graphic: Scott Brown, The Orange County Register

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Gualo Rai, Middle Road

Badminton players pose for a group photo during a break in their morning scrimmage at the TSL Sports Complex. JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

BONDS through badminton

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

For a whole month, Miok Park burned the phone lines to Kwangju, South Korea where her husband Du Jin is based, her voice trembling with misery for all the things that she and her son missed about home.

Du Jin often called back, worried about how Miok and their son, Daniel, were coping and thinking that they may have to give up on their dream of giving their son an international education.

Seven months later, Miok and her son are still here, thanks to an unexpected but welcome new family, the Northern Marianas Badminton Association.

"I still call my husband in South Korea, but this time I am happy telling him how I enjoy playing with a lot of people here. I meet new friends who are also like my second family. We have lunches together after the games and my son also plays with the sons and daughters of other members," Miok said.

"My husband was relieved, knowing we're slowly adjusting to the island-style life and we have someone to spend our time with. Playing and meeting people of different ethnicities make our life away from home bearable," she added.

Miok, who plays badminton every morning three times a week at the TSL Sports Complex, is only one of several people whose lives took a significant turn after learning to play one of the fastest-growing sports in the CNMI.

Athlete rediscovered

Malou Malasarte started playing badminton three years ago and rediscovered the athlete in her.

A member of a varsity volleyball team of a collegiate school in the Philippines for three years, Malasarte suited up for the Lyceum Lady Pirates where some of the former members of the Philippine national team also played. In high school, Malasarte spent four years playing for St. Joseph's Academy.

When she graduated, got married, and moved to Saipan with her four children and husband Bong, sports took a back seat. "The athlete in me was gone for a long time. I was out of shape until a friend encouraged me to try badminton a few years ago. Now, I am back in sports and feeling better."

She started out in Class C—the beginner's level—but is now in Class A, the highest rank in terms of competence with the sport. "Badminton brings back memories of my playing years in high school and college—the spirit of sportsmanship and camaraderie and the sense of accomplishments when you win," she said.

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12 months:	MMR, Hepatitis A, Varicella (Chicken Pox)
15-18 months:	DTap, PCV13, Hib
4-6 years:	DTap, E-IPV, MMR, Hepatitis A, Varicella (Chicken Pox)
11-18 years:	DTap, MCV, Hepatitis A, HPV (3 doses)

You can get your child immunized at: Commonwealth Health Center (CHC) Garapan Immunization Clinic • Tel. (670) 236-8745

If your child is past due for his/her shots, please call the CNMI Immunization Clinic at (670) 236-8745/8781/8783 for information on how to get your child up to date. Remember you can immunize your child against 14 vaccine preventable diseases by age 2.

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You know what makes your child happy, sad, comfortable, scared, excited, anxious, calm. You know what your child is interested in. You know what your child needs.

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Make time to LISTEN
TALK to your child
PLAY baby games
READ a picture book
MASSAGE your child
Have family meals TOGETHER
Take WALKS with your child
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Always CELEBRATE your child's ACCOMPLISHMENTS, no matter how small they seem to be.

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A gentle hug, a tender kiss, an encouraging smile...
...Sometimes that's all it takes.

Big Steps for Little Feet
Early Intervention Service System
Public School System and Department of Public Health

Printing made possible by the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant.

Supported in part by project H25MC06112 from the MCHB (Title V, Social Security Act), HRSA, DHHS.

Boredom busted

Before badminton, Shirley Kim lived what she describes as a monotonous life. After working the entire day at a family-owned business, she then goes home.

When she learned to play badminton, though, a regular trip to the court was added to the equation. So did opening and awards ceremonies, cleanup drives, clinics, walkathons, donation turnovers, Liberation Day parades, and teammates parties.

Almost by accident and with no prior design, Kim became much more sociable, attending one activity after another and meeting a lot of people. She even served as president of the association for one year and led NMBA's events on and off the court.

The same could be said for Esther Choi. Before badminton, her routine was a bore. "My children are in their teens and they usually leave the house to be with their friends. I am left alone, as my husband is in Korea. I had nothing to do but stay at home before. Then my sister, Hannah, encouraged me to try badminton," she said.

At first, the Iksin City native was hesitant, as she felt she is already too old and doesn't have the physical requirement for the sport. In less than a year, though, there is hardly any trace of the 50-year-old woman struggling to trade volleys and serves with younger players.

"I noticed that I move faster after I started playing. I also lost weight, which is good for my age. Then after my children go out, I am not worried and sad that I'll be left alone, sitting at the couch, watching TV. Sometimes, I even leave home ahead of them, as I am excited to meet my friends here and play with them. I look forward to every morning to play," Choi said.

For Choi and others like her, it's never too late to play badminton or any other sport. Old skills can be revived, more bonds can be tied, and dull lives can be brightened up—all by just picking up a racket and smashing a shuttlecock.

Families bond

The list of players from the same families playing the sport and sometimes competing against each other have grown since NMBA was established in 2005.

Lito Mendoza was one of the few first players to join the NMBA in its infancy and his wife, Malou, later learned to play the sport.

Adding to the list are siblings Lanie, Lot, and Wowie Abuel; father and son Macario and Ezekiel Macario, brothers Kanata and Manatsu Omori and their mother, Annarose; the mother-and-daughter tandems of Loyda and Angie Ito and Cecille and Chris Obaldo; the mother-and-son duos of Gigi and Raphael Zapanta and Miok Park and Daniel Choi; and the Savellanos—mother Merlie, father Jojo, and daughter Jen.

"I get to bond with my husband who is really a sports enthusiast. Badminton is a mutual interest for us as a couple," said Malou Mendoza.

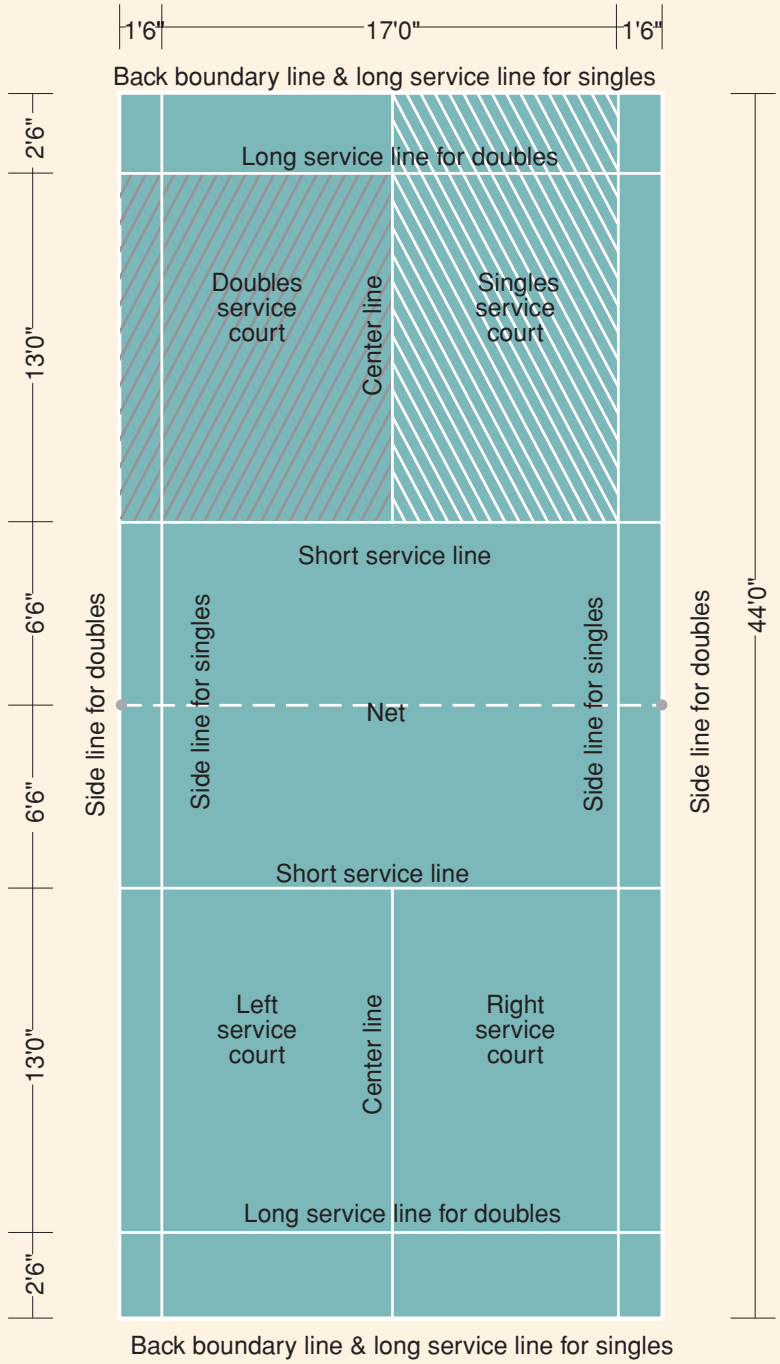
While Malasarte is on the court competing, her children are usually on the sidelines, learning the sport. "My kids are in school in the morning, while I am at work. In the afternoon, I bring them to the court and that gives us more time to bond as they also love playing badminton," Malasarte said. Since then, her son Jerome has attained competitive levels, and even won a doubles tournament early this year.

For these families, the badminton court has become their second home.

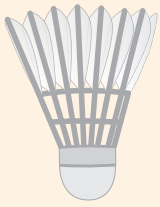
FACTS&FIGURES

The sport of badminton made its Olympic debut at Barcelona in 1992. Both men and women compete in separate singles and doubles competitions.

The court



The shuttlecock



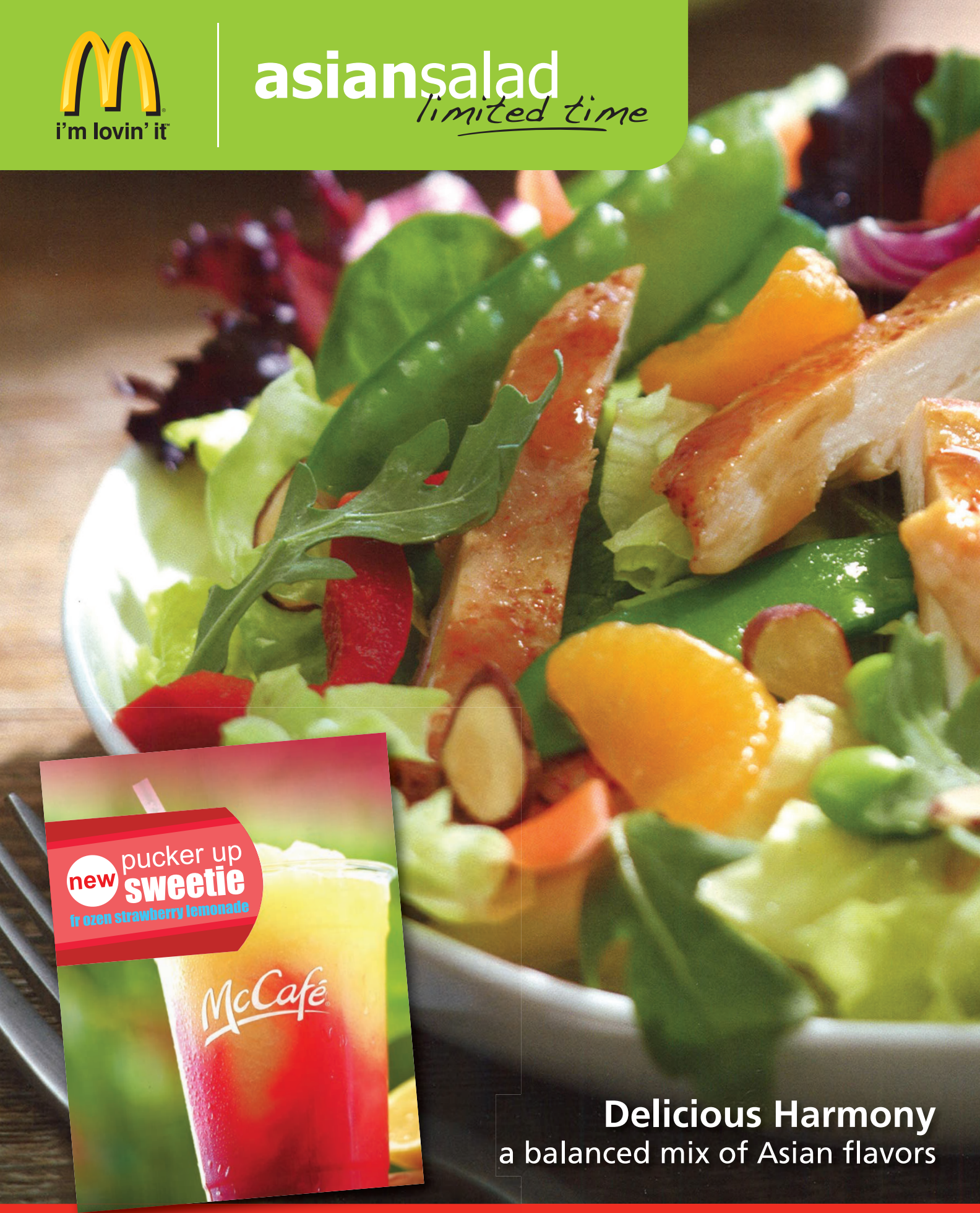
The traditional feathered shuttlecock must weigh between 4.74 and 5.5 grams and have 14 to 16 feathers fixed in a cork base covered with a thin layer of leather or similar material. For competition, shuttles are humidified to prevent drying and brittleness. They cost about $20 a dozen and one will last for only 2 games.

SOURCE: U.S. Badminton Association

i'm lovin' it

asiansalad

limited time



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Well, hello hips.

CATHERINE ROSARIO PERRY
Contributing Writer

The music's pumping, hips are swaying, and revelers are "cha-cha"ing their workday stress away. No, it's not happy hour. It's the latest workout craze to hit Saipan, the Latin-inspired, dance-fitness program Zumba.

"I feel great after Zumba!" says Carol Chargualaf, who was hooked earlier this year after her very first class. "The best part is, it's a lot of fun, and I can go with a group of friends and have a great time. It's like a different kind of happy hour."

As women and men share their growing enthusiasm, Zumba has sprouted up in recent months on Facebook and in water cooler office conversations as the new "hot" workout for those who enjoy it at either a local health club or community center or at home. In fact, with its contagious blend of Latin and international rhythms, the Zumba program happily promotes itself as a "Fitness-Party."

The program was created in the 1990s by celebrity fitness trainer Alberto "Beto" Perez in his native Columbia when he forgot his music tapes for workout class and had to improvise choreography with the music on hand. The Zumba program was launched internationally in 2007 and is now offered in 125 countries by trained instructors, including Elly Stoilova at Gold's Gym on Saipan.

Stoilova started doing Zumba as part of her personal weight loss program, adding it to her regimen of weight lifting, cycling, strength training, stretching, and Pilates.

"When I first heard about the Zumba Fitness Program, I was skeptical," she admits. "I have tried other fitness programs on DVD that didn't impress me much."

However, a search on YouTube quickly caught her interest.

HELPFUL HINTS

- Start slowly. Ease your body into the movements and routine.
- Warm your body up properly. If the class doesn't begin with a warm up, lightly jog in place or do a few jumping jacks to get your heart pumping.
- Don't feel like you have to do the movements perfectly from start to finish. The important thing is to keep moving. You'll catch on to the routine the more you do it.
- Dance at a level that's comfortable for you, and build up as you go.
- Wear appropriate shoes. If you are not sure, get recommendations from the instructor.
- Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. Drink water before, during, and after class.
- The key to moving those hips? Bend the knees.

Sources: *Henry Ford Center for Athletic Medicine, Detroit Medical Center, Henry Ford Health System, University of Michigan's M-Health program*

"I fell in love with the music and the movements from the first glance and ordered two sets, one for my friend and one for me to try. It all worked, as I could see my pounds melting each week," she says.

After her initial encounter with the program, Stoilova went on to attend instructor training in Guam and to gain a license to teach Zumba Basic and Aqua Zumba, also known as the Pool Party.

The Zumba workout provides long-term fitness benefits through exhilarating, high calorie-burning fitness classes. The routines feature training sessions with fast and slow rhythms and resistance training, which combined, successfully tone and sculpt the body while burning fat.

While busy schedules compete for the time of many good-intentioned exercisers, Polly Masga enjoys Zumba in the convenience of her own home.

"I'm not really fond of going to the gym, so I got Zumba for the Nintendo Wii and do the routines at least twice a week," she says. "I don't feel like I'm working out, because I'm having too much fun dancing! The music gets you moving. You don't realize it, but the moves you learn are for some of the world's most creative and sexiest dances. So not only am I exercising, I'm also getting some cool dance lessons!"

Cumbia, salsa, merengue, belly dancing, tango, hip hop—all are just some of the dance styles adding savor to a Zumba workout, but the uninitiated need not fear being able to pick up the dance steps.

"The most difficult part of it is just trying to coordinate the steps with the hips," admits Chargualaf. "Sometimes it can be tricky, but it's not discouraging,"

Stoilova emphasizes that participants do not need to know how to dance in order to enjoy Zumba.

"What is different also, and I like this very much, is that mastering the steps involves adding some personal flair, based on mood

Ready to Zumba?

and allowing the body to groove to the bustling Latin sounds. There's no standard way to do Zumba Fitness. It allows everybody's personality to shine," she says.

While the physical benefits of the fitness program can be measured in heart rates or pounds lost, those who party with Zumba say the biggest payoffs are mental and emotional.

Chargualaf says that while she used to bring workout clothes to the office to motivate her to go walking after work, she would also take advantage of even the smallest excuse to skip out. Since she tried Zumba, her motivation to exercise has grown.

"I can't wait to go and want to make sure I get a spot in the class. If I forget my workout clothes, I would rush home to change and head straight to the gym. I get annoyed when something comes up, and I can't make it to Zumba," she says with a laugh.

"Working out in the mornings really gets me in a positive mood, which means I bring a positive attitude to the rest of my day," Masga adds.

Stoilova says finding Zumba has brought balance to her life.

"If I do Zumba Fitness in the morning, I feel like I am dancing all day long! I smile, I laugh more, and I feel alive. I haven't been to a discotheque for about eight years, as I thought I was a little old to enjoy the dance floor with teenagers. Zumba Fitness brought back the pleasure of dancing to my life."

So the next time you're looking for an excuse to party, remember, you don't really need an excuse—you just need Zumba. Party on!

JOSHUA JONES

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

TAGA Sports Staff Writer

At just 18 years old, left-handed pitching phenom Joshua Jones is already one of the brightest stars in the firmament of local baseball. Hands down the best pitcher in the Saipan Little League, Jones may be the best hurler in the entire CNMI right now.

Last season, Baseball Confederation of Oceania talent officer Ray Brown stated flatly in a scouting report that of the three Saipan pitching prospects he selected for future observation, Jones was the lone athlete gifted with a "Major League curveball."

Jones' pitching statistics are through the roof and his batting numbers are quite impressive as well. He very well may have the most decorated Little League resume ever on Saipan. It is always a pleasure to witness him in action; he routinely delivers lights out performances even though every opponent he faces gives their all to show him up.

This year marks his last run for a Little League World Series appearance in addition to the anticipated start of his collegiate career. I asked him about his background and future aspirations as the season's end nears:

When did you start playing ball?

I started at home when I was 5 years old and entered the Saipan Little League program at age 10.

How many all-star appearances have you made?

I made my first all-star team at 12 and made the cut ever since. I finished second place in the Asia-Pacific Regional tournament twice, but unfortunately never made it to the World Series.

Is baseball your favorite sport?

Yes, it is a big family tradition of ours.

When did you start pitching and did you always like it?

I've been pitching since day one. I am left-handed and my coaches always told me it was a significant advantage for me. And yes, I have always enjoyed being on the mound.

How many pitches do you know how to throw?

I throw a 4-seam fastball, a 2-seam fastball, and a curveball. I am also working on my change up. Changing speeds will definitely help me improve my game on the mound.

What is your favorite pitch?

The 4-seam, it comes in fast and slows down before it speeds back up again as it crosses the plate. It also rises sometimes, which tends to give hitters even more difficulty.

What is your philosophy on the mound?

I just try to play my game and minimize mistakes. I also try to keep my confidence up because that's an important factor when on the mound.

Who have you looked up to starting out?

My older cousin Jonathan Jones is a big mentor of mine. He is a left-handed pitcher as well. My all-star manager Patrick Tenorio has also taught me a lot about the game in my three years under him. Although he is a manager, he is really more like a coach. My teammate Juan Maratita has always been a close friend of mine as well. We played a lot together growing up when the all-star season comes around.

Most memorable moments in your career?

Winning the Big League title last year was a sweet win—we won, 3-2, and I got two RBIs and a run. I pitched the whole game and held the No. 1 team to just two runs in my first year. Pitching against Guam in the Micro Games last year was also a very memorable experience. However, I have made a lot of good memories over the years.

Have you also always been a good hitter as well?

Actually I think hitting is easier than pitching, but admittedly, I practiced hitting more than pitching growing up.

What other positions do you like to play?

Centerfield and first base.

Does the pressure affect you or do you thrive on it?

I am used to it. It doesn't matter to me, I will gladly pitch any time anywhere against anyone…and the bigger game the better.

Do you have any rituals before or during a game?

Before I step on the rubber, I like to grab some dirt and rub it in my hands. Then I like to rub the ball to get a better grip so I can throw strikes.

How do you like your chances with this year's Big League crew?

I honestly think we are a very strong unit all around and I like our chances this year. We can do all three—pitching, hitting, and play defense, especially pitching.

How closely do you follow Major League baseball?

I like the Yankees as a whole, but not really a fan of their individual players. Instead, I prefer watching Philadelphia Phillies' Cliff Lee and Roy Halladay on the mound and Texas Rangers' Josh Hamilton at the plate and in the field. »

Joshua Jones winds up for a pitch at the Francisco "Tan Ko" M. Palacios Ballfield.

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

What advice would you give younger players?

I would encourage them to keep practicing on both their strengths and weaknesses and also to stay humble.

What other sports or activities capture your interest?

I like volleyball, basketball, going to the beach, kayaking, and other outdoor activities. I try to maintain an active lifestyle.

What are your plans after graduation?

I hope to attend college in the mainland and keep playing baseball.

How many schools have expressed interest in you?

There are two schools that have contacted me: Colby Community College in Colby, Kansas, and Indian Hills Community College in Ottumwa, Iowa.

Have you decided where you going?

I am strongly leaning toward Colby because they have been more actively communicating with me to attend their school.

What are some of your favorite subjects in school?

I like math, history, and government studies.

Have you decided on a major field of study in college?

Not really, but I am interested in mechanical engineering.

Are you nervous about playing collegiate ball?

No, actually I am really excited to test my skills stateside. My real goal is to make it to the NCAA Division 1 level.

Are you nervous about going to college?

Yes, I am way more nervous about school because I've never been to the mainland and won't know anybody.

What else are you looking forward to doing in the mainland?

I'd like to take a road trip and go sightseeing, try new foods, maybe attend a rock concert, etc.

What do you eventually want to be?

I want to be a pro baseball player, but if it is not in the cards then I would like to attend a Universal Technical Institute to study engineering and maybe be an engine mechanic.

What is your favorite food(s)?

Barbecue, spaghetti, Caesar salad.

What kind of movies and music do you like? Anything you don't like?

I like all kinds of movies and I like reggae music. I don't like pop music and am not a big fan of fitada or some other traditional foods (I hope I don't get in trouble for saying that).

Describe your personality.

I am not a fan of big crowds, but will occasionally go out and party. I actually like to keep it low key and sometimes prefer to be by myself, but I have a close-knit group of friends that I hang out with regularly. I also never see myself as a follower. TG

> I am way more nervous about school because I've never been to the mainland and won't know anybody.

Jones is finishing up his junior year at Kagman High School and is completing his final Saipan Little League season this year. TAGA Sports sat down with Jones for this brief interview during the 15th Annual CNMI Little League District Tournament in Songsong, Rota.

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Saipan's kingpin

Robert Talavera defies the odds with five perfect games

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

Robert Talavera's first time rolling a bowling ball was far from perfect. Five consecutive gutter balls that careened from side to side before sputtering to a halt midway through the lane.

That's when the now five-time perfect bowler realized that bowling—a sport that he used to consider some sort of parlor game—was actually *hard*.

Growing up in Minalin, Pampanga, the then 20-year-old Talavera played the sport majority of Filipinos are passionate about—basketball ("I was usually the center or power forward for my team")—and bowling was the farthest thing from his mind.

From time to time, he would come across friends and classmates playing bowling in the mall but he thought it was more of a parlor game than an actual sport. "I saw my friends bowling but I wasn't interested. I thought bowling was easy."

It was in 1989 when Talavera learned otherwise. It was his first few months on Saipan after being hired by Jet Holdings to serve as assistant mechanic for the Oleai bowling center. One uneventful evening while helping close up shop, Talavera picked up a bowling ball and threw it down the lane. The ball careened to the side and into the gutter. Four more throws and the same thing happened again and again.

"That's when I realized that the sport was really hard and it became some sort of a challenge for me," he said.

Dodong Eparwa, his supervisor at the time, finally had had enough of the neophyte bowler's clumsy rolls and came to his aid.

"He was not throwing it right," said the now 62-year-old bowling mechanic in Filipino. "He was using a 10-lb ball so I handed him a 16-lb one."

Talavera tried the heavier ball and it seemed to work; the ball finally had direction and fell quite a number of pins in its wake. "That's when I started to have an interest in the sport. I said to myself this is something I could learn," he said.

From then on, Talavera was hooked. He practiced 30 to 45 minutes each day after work to improve his bowling skills.

That early, though, Eparwa already had visions of Talavera someday dominating local bowling. He said his ward had raw power and was determined to learn and improve his game. "He really had potential and always wanted to practice. He really liked bowling even then and that's probably why he became the bowler he is today."

Soon after that, Talavera would join a few of his co-workers in a friendly game, with the winner usually getting a free dinner.

PERFECT GAMES

The first one happened on Feb. 15, 2006, and is still Robert Talavera's most memorable moment in the sport. "That was the year they raised the perfect game prize to $5,000. I remember feeling numb for my 12th shot because all I was thinking about was the $5,000 prize. I almost wasn't able to roll the bowling ball."

He tried holding the ball three times but kept putting it back on the rack as his palms were perspiring profusely. Sweaty or not, it was those hands that gave him that shot at glory and the $5,000 prize.

He would roll his second 300 game five months later on July 15, 2006, while his third and fourth perfect games incredibly came in consecutive days on Sept. 24 and 25, 2007.

It would take another four years before Talavera had his fifth brush with perfection when he rolled bowling's ultimate score last Feb. 11.

Talavera finally made his bowling league debut in 1992, with the help of Eparwa and other bowlers. That was when his manager, John Igisair, recruited him to play for the company's bowling team.

Honed by thousands of hours of practice and hundreds of friendly bowling games, Talavera was not your ordinary rookie. He went directly to the high average category as he was already averaging 170 pinfalls a game. However, he had to wait a couple more years before tasting individual success.

"I started playing leagues, never winning because I was just a beginner. But I never stopped playing. In fact, I played in all the leagues at the Saipan Bowling [Center]," he said.

His patience and perseverance finally paid off when he won he won a class A championship in the mid-'90s. That appeared to open the floodgates for Talavera as he won other accolades after that, culminating with the 1998 May Masters and the 1998 Bowler of the Year.

In all, Talavera would take home more than 100 trophies in bowling. More impressively, he has the unique distinction of having rolled five perfect games—the highest score possible in a game of bowling, achieved by rolling a strike during every frame.

As always, winners will always have their critics and Talavera is no exception. Chief among the beef against him is the accusation that he always has an advantage because he works at a bowling alley. When asked about this, Talavera just smiled and gently pointed out that, if that were true, "then all employees [of Saipan Bowling Center] who play should also be winning and having perfect games. All I can say is I'm just lucky."

Talavera has also won at Capital Bowling Center and his scores there are comparable to those at Saipan Bowling Center, so "it's really not about the venue."

Talavera, whose highest average in a league is 213 and in a tournament is 227, said he is also proud to have represented the CNMI in many off-island competitions, including an overseas Filipino workers tournament in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1999 where he finished runner-up in the masters.

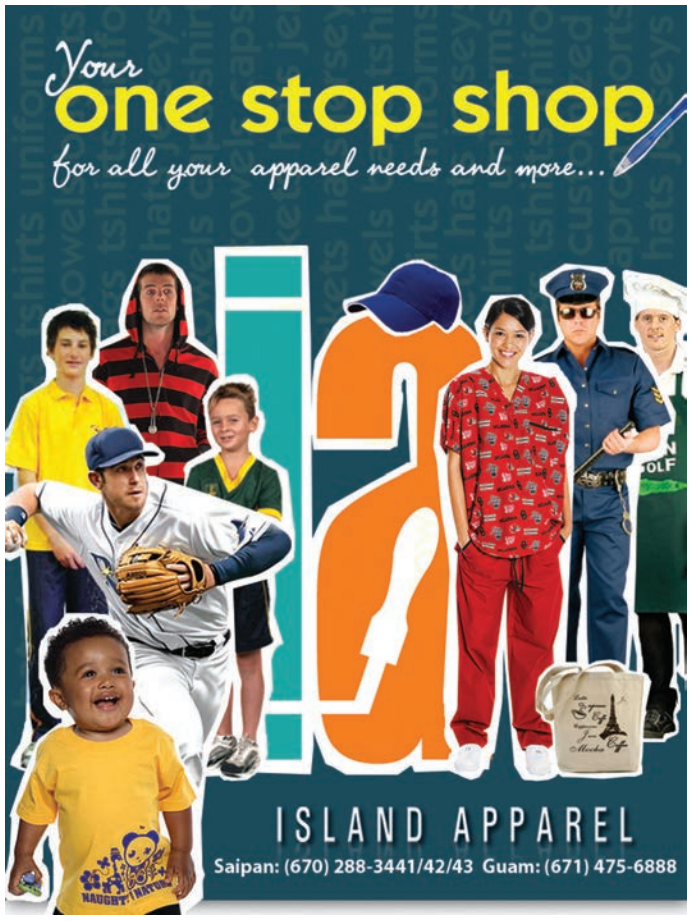
Not in his wildest dreams did he thought of becoming this good in a sport he initially shunned. "I never thought I would bowl a perfect game, much less five. I also never thought of someday winning a bowling tournament."

Back then, when he was just starting out, Talavera idolized the likes of Benny Pangelinan, Joe Guerrero, Jess Rebusada, and Mark "The Shark" Halstead. He said he sees a bright future for CNMI bowling with Raymond Angeles, Simon Manacop, Alex Castro, and Raymond and Raphael Zapanta leading the pack. TS

What is a perfect game?

According to Wikipedia, a perfect game is the highest score possible in a game of bowling, achieved by rolling a strike during every frame. In bowling games that use 10 pins, such as Ten-pin bowling, Candlepin bowling, and Duckpin bowling, the highest possible score is 300, achieved by bowling 12 strikes in a row in a single game: one strike in each of the first nine frames, and three more in the tenth frame. Because a strike counts as ten pins plus any pinfall in the next two balls, 30 points are possible in a given frame.

TIDBIT: The worst time of Robert Talavera's bowling career were the years when a mysterious back injury almost sidelined him from the sport in the late 1990s to early 2000s. Continuous treatment and a more conscious effort to exercise and watch his diet gave Talavera back his old winning form.



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The 1997 Saipan Big League All-Stars were the first CNMI representatives to appear in the Little League World Series, which was held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A mighty mouse that roars

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

LITTLE LEAGUE DIVISIONS
Majors: 11-12 years old
Junior: 13-14 years old
Senior: 15-16 years old
Big: 17-18 years old

All things considered, it is a tad amazing that Saipan—a small dot in the western Pacific with a comparatively small population—has been consistently churning out little league baseball teams that more often than not go on to compete in the World Series.

What makes the feat even more amazing is the concentrated amount of time, heart, and dedication that league officials, players, and families pour into the sport to make the trip happen.

James Ada, the current CNMI District Administrator, credits Saipan's success to the dedication of the managers, volunteers, and coaches that develop the athletes at a very young age.

"We are fortunate to have a lot of good coaches and former players that give back to the program who pass down their knowledge of the game. Our kids start at very young ages and baseball is a family tradition. We may not have the resources that other organizations have, but we surely have the talent. Now we just need to improve the level of discipline it takes to bring our program up even higher," he said.

Ada chartered the CNMI Little League district in 1996, which entered into competition the following year. Since then Saipan has swept all 15 district championships in all four divisions. Before then, Saipan had to compete against up to seven Guam teams in order to vie for what was known as the Far-East Regional berth.

Ada refers to discipline as a central factor

The 1999 Saipan Big League All-Stars won their second consecutive Far-East title (after being waived over in 1997) and appeared in the Little League World Series, which was moved to Tucson, Arizona.

MAJOR

Saipan's first titles were won on Saipan's San Vicente Field over Tinian; Rota entered into the mix the following year in 1998, when the tourney was held on Tinian.

JUNIOR

In 1999, the CNMI re-established its junior league charter to enter into the Asia-Pacific regional level of competition in the 2000 season.

The Saipan juniors competed in Guam in 2000 but did not clinch the title; however, Saipan went on to win five consecutive junior titles from 2001-2005.

Its first championship came on Saipan; then in Guam; in Manila, Philippines; Jakarta, Indonesia; and its fifth on Tinian.

From there, the Saipan juniors endured a three-year drought until they came back with the 2009 ASPAC championship in Jakarta.

All six champion teams represented the CNMI in the Little League World Series stateside in Taylor, Michigan.

SENIOR

The senior and big divisions were chartered in 1996 and entered into regional competition in 1997.

The Saipan senior all-stars won their first ASPAC title in Guam in 2004 and were fortunate to be part of the first time the Little League World Series was held in Bangor, Maine. The Saipan seniors also clinched titles in 2007, in Guam, and swept the ASPAC last year in Jakarta.

Notably, the CNMI seniors came up a little short of the LLWS semifinals in 2007, but defeated the eventual champions from Cartersville, Georgia, 5-4, in pool play.

BIG

Saipan's big league all-stars were gifted their first senior league "Far East" championship in 2004 via technicality after their rivals from Guam, Hong Kong, and the Philippines were all declared ineligible.

Then in Guam in 1998 Saipan won outright what is known today as the Asia-Pacific Regional Championship.

Both big division World Series tourneys were in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Saipan's big leaguers then won their third consecutive regional title in 1999, on Palau, and competed in the World Series, which changed its venue to Tucson, Arizona.

Saipan also won big league titles in 2001, on Saipan; in 2007, in Guam; and again, on Saipan, in 2008. The World Series was held in Easley, South Carolina from 2001 on.

The Saipan major division was gifted its first-ever trip to the World Series in 1993, as a result of multiple violations by the other competing Far East division teams.

Just over a decade later, Saipan won the ASPAC in 2004, 5-4, over Jakarta, in Guam, and advanced to the Williamsport, Virginia for its third time in 2006, from Hong Kong.

Notably, 2004 was almost a banner year for Saipan as the major, junior and senior all stars all advanced to the big show, while the big leaguers came up just a run short, 1-2, to Guam. Three out of the four teams all made it to the World Series finals tournament held in the mainland.

when comparing the CNMI to other contenders such as Chinese Taipei, South Korea, and Japan.

He pointed out that the Chinese Taipei district has already bannered 17 Little League World Series major division titles since 1969; 17 big league titles since 1968; 17 senior titles since 1961; and won its first junior league title last year in its first-ever appearance in the division. From the start of the ASPAC, its 2010 juniors went undefeated all the way to the World Series finals, which they won over Tyler, Texas, 9-1.

Ada noted, however, that such districts are more populated and have far greater number of players to choose from. They also have more resources at hand for further training and development. TS

Ada's contract as the CNMI DA position expires next June and he is still on the fence about whether to continue as the DA or pass the reins down to someone else. He acknowledged having a few people in mind he thinks are deserving of the responsibility, but did not disclose any names as of yet. Ada did share, however, that Rota will be the host venue for next year's 2012 senior and big league AP regional tournaments.

Super Ma

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

When dressed in his coat and tie as host for the Tinian Dynasty Hotel & Casino's VIP Services department, the bespectacled Mazheng "Mark" Ma is the quintessential Mr. Nice Guy, going out of his way to ensure that guests get the pampering they expect.

During his free time, though, when he suits up for the 10-member Tinian Dynasty Table Tennis Team, Ma turns into a focused dynamo, methodically demolishing opponents with dizzying power shots that seem to come from nowhere.

In his latest outing for the Marianas Amateur Table Tennis Association's 15th Table Tennis Goodwill Tournament in March, Ma dominated the singles championship—his sixth win in seven tries. Ma also took home with co-worker Luke Lu his second doubles champion trophy, on top of leading the Dynasty team to its seventh championship in a row.

Ma describes his playing style as highly aggressive and he relies on his offense to subdue his opponents. He concedes to being gifted with natural talent, but also credits his coaches for fine-tuning his game; he learned a lot about game strategy from his coaches to complement his fierce striking ability.

Mazheng "Mark" Ma works as host for the Tinian Dynasty Hotel & Casino's VIP Services department.

The 27-year-old Ma has been playing ping-pong for almost 20 years now, finishing third place in his first organized competition at the young age of 9. During physical education classes at his elementary school in Xi An, China, Ma was handpicked by the school coach to represent the school in inter-school competitions. After high school, Ma majored in Physical Sciences in college and, although he did not receive a scholarship, Ma still fared well in various recreational events during those years.

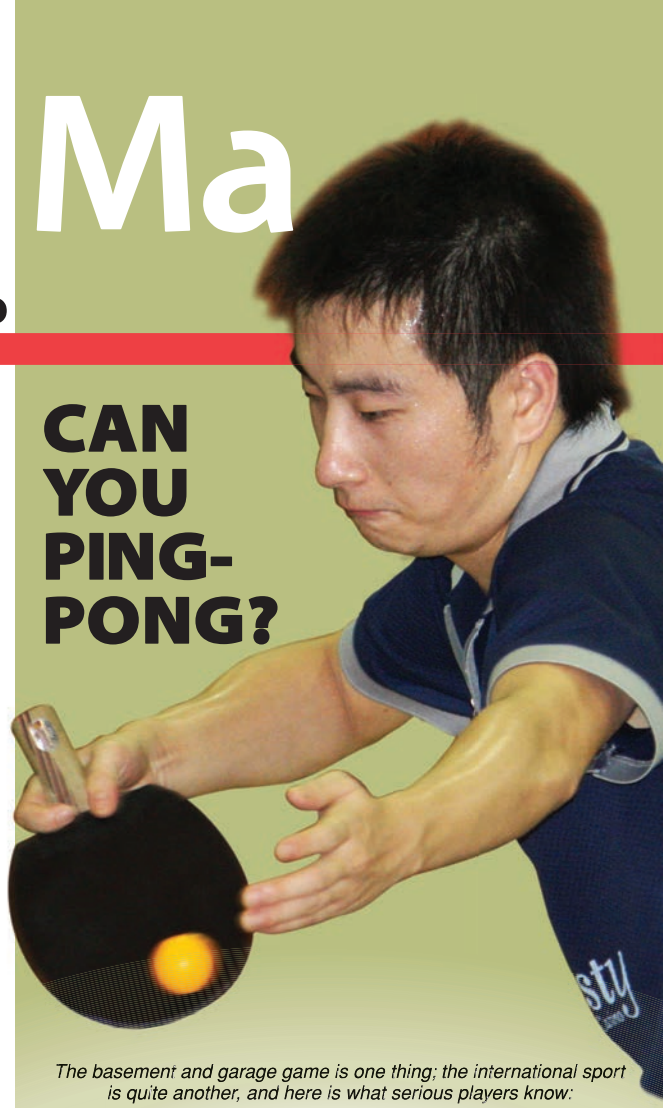
He prefers to use the Stic brand paddles and Hong Shuang Xi balls and tables. The brands are top of the line equipment in China where table tennis is deemed the country's national sport. A Stic paddle can cost upwards of $100 and HSX balls are considered the No. 1 ball in China.

The Tinian Dynasty team practices twice a week in the staff canteen and beefs up its training schedule as competition dates grow near. Besides Ma, the team also features Alfred Yue, Liang Weibin, Su Yong Dong, Charlie Chung, and Luke's brother, Robin Lu.

Normally there are two goodwill tournaments a year; however, the next competition is still in the air. These events usually attract players from Saipan, Guam, and Korea. The year-end event may take place some time in October or November, but the date and location have not been confirmed.

Ma hopes that the sport will further expand in the CNMI in years to come. "I hope that the success of our team will win more fans over for the growth of the sport and perhaps gain more participants in the future."

In addition to ping-pong, the five-year Tinian resident also enjoys singing, playing guitar, playing Texas Hold'em poker, and badminton. TS



CAN YOU PING-PONG?

The basement and garage game is one thing; the international sport is quite another, and here is what serious players know:

Grip on paddle

"Shake hand" grip is the basic

Keep wrist straight, not angled up or down from forearm

Thumb rests on edge of forehand (front) side

Index finger touches curve of blade

Hold paddle loosely

A big forehand smash

A special "put-away" shot to capitalize on your opponent's momentary bad position – or lack of confidence

Use it to end an exchange of weak backhand shots

1 Move whole body for shot
Hit ball while it is rising

2 Hit ball hard and straight; do not try to give it any spin

Feel sharp sound and impact with wood of paddle, behind the rubber coating

Source: 5min Life Videopedia
Graphic: Helen Lee McComas, Paul Trap

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Trail favorites

CLARISSA V. DAVID
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

With its relatively extensive tree cover, mountains pockmarked with caves, and forests littered with World War II-era relics, Saipan is ideal for runners and bikers on the lookout for on- and off-road trails, with several more being discovered by these sports enthusiasts by the day. In this article, we ask several of them about their trail preferences.

KANAE QUINN

Kanae says her favorite trails are in Marpi. "My favorite ride is when we climb the FEBC trail, which has nice shaded areas. At the top, we go to the right and descend down the Kimikaze trail which is slightly technical, cross the street and go straight into the Autobahn trail, which used to be quite difficult but now, relatively easy. From there, we ride on Santa Claus Lane through the Cowtown-Banzai trail," she says. The Papago resident admits that, after several crashes as well as shoulder and knee injuries, she has since stuck to the easier trails.

YOSH GABALDON

Yosh says he has lots of favorite trails, depending on what he will do. He likes going from Laolao to the Forbidden lookout. "Right now, my favorite trail is from Hyatt to the Botanical Gardens. I run up through Navy Hill and around the side of Mt. Tapochau," says the Navy Hill resident.

BUTCH SUBLEMENTE

Butch, a Pacific Islands Club staff, prefers the XTERRA course. "I love the XTERRA trail run and bike course because it's kind of a brutal course. This is what I always hear from first time runners and bikers," says the Garapan resident.

BEN BABAUTA

Although he doesn't have favorite trails, Ben says his running trail average is about 10K to 30K (6.2 to 18 miles) and takes his bike for a ride for 40K to 60K (25 to 38 miles).

KIMIKO HASEGAWA

Understandably, Kimiko Hasegawa's favorite trail is one that was named after her and is used for hash runs, the Kimikaze trail. "If you go down the trail, it's a fun and short trail. But if you go up the trail, it's really challenging not to get off the bike," says this Pacific Islands Club employee.

MAMIKO BERGER

The wife of lawyer and athlete Joshua Berger, Mamiko is a long distance runner for three years now. "I love to run around Marpi where there are less artificial things. I love to just be with nature," says Mamiko, who lives in Tanapag.

SUZY KINDEL

Marpi tops Suzy's list for the best places for running and biking on Saipan because of its intrinsic beauty, limited traffic, as well as the variety and number of trails available. "There is always a nice breeze out there and often shade. I run out in Marpi two to three times a week and love going out there. I just hope Marpi can be preserved as it currently is for the benefit of our islands athletes, including recreational walkers," adds the Sadog Tasi resident.

Dirk Nowitzki
has more than talent on his side

DAVID HAUGH
Chicago Tribune

It was 7 o'clock one spring morning 13 years ago inside a high school gymnasium in San Antonio, and only one player stood on the court shooting baskets before breakfast.

Dirk Nowitzki was a tall, unpolished and largely unknown shaggy-haired blonde kid smoothly dropping one rainbow jump shot after another the way he just did in leading the Mavericks to the NBA title. At one point the 6-foot-11 Nowitzki hit so many 3-pointers in a row that Chicago broadcaster David Kaplan, in town to cover the Final Four for WGN-AM, felt compelled to call a friend after observing the 19-year-old's jaw-dropping shooting display.

His friend was then-Northwestern basketball coach Kevin O'Neill.

"Kap called me saying there's this 7-footer making all these 3s and wanting permission to offer him a scholarship for Northwestern on the spot," O'Neill recalled Monday. "I said, 'You gotta be kidding me ... but OK.'"

Empowered, Kaplan did just that after finding out from Nowitzki that he wasn't a member of the Spurs—as some assumed—but in Texas with his German basketball club playing in a Final Four-related event. Nowitzki mentioned he was looking for an American college to showcase his skills for the NBA. Kaplan's quick recruiting pitch sold Nowitzki on the idea of feeling comfortable amid Chicago's heavy German population.

"He told me, 'Sounds great, I'd love to set up a visit,'" Kaplan said. "Then everybody saw him play, and there was no doubt he was going pro."

Two months later, the Bucks drafted Nowitzki ninth and traded him to the Mavericks for the late Robert Traylor.

"Yeah, you could say Dirk narrowed his choices to Northwestern and the Milwaukee Bucks," O'Neill said, chuckling.

One day Northwestern's loss will become the Hall of Fame's gain, now that Nowitzki has secured his legacy with an NBA championship. But Nowitzki did more than just establish himself as one of the sport's all-time top 25 all-around players. He and the Mavs reminded purists that basketball, at its best, remains a team sport executed by committed players with a shared goal and not a skills competition where selfish interests prevail.

Sure, the Heat might have been Hollywood as hell. But the Mavs proved that in close games, you need a little Hickory too.

Outside of Dallas and Cleveland, no city should have savored the Mavs' win more than Chicago. Outside of cavalier Mavericks owner Mark Cuban and Cavaliers maverick owner Dan Gilbert, no NBA executives felt more encouraged by the Finals than John Paxson and Gar Forman.

The Mavs completed the statement about teamwork that the Bulls couldn't finish. Even so, it had to be reassuring for the Bulls organization to watch the Best Team versus Bigger Stars debate settled decisively. Pax and Gar should interpret The Mavs-In-Six message this way: Change nothing. Stay patient. Stick with the plan. Surround Derrick Rose with shooters and depth.

And shop wisely.

Personnel-wise, the series mostly reinforced the glaring need to find a shooting guard the Bulls lacked—a guy who provides what Jason Terry did for the Mavericks. Nowitzki finished with a flurry by scoring 10 points in the final 7 minutes, 23 seconds of Game 6, but the Mavs survived his rocky start and 9-of-27 shooting largely because Terry scored 27.

TOM FOX/DALLAS MORNING NEWS/MCT

Dallas Mavericks power forward Dirk Nowitzki (41) raises the Larry O'Brien Trophy alongside his teammates after defeating the Miami Heat 105-95 in game six of the NBA Finals at American Airlines Arena Sunday, June 12, 2011 in Miami, Florida.

Looking beyond the roster, it also couldn't have hurt the Bulls' Tom Thibodeau to see a coach have success introducing change this late in the playoffs. Mavs coach Rick Carlisle inserting J.J. Barea into the starting lineup before Game 4 made a major impact. So did Carlisle mixing in a zone defense that sucked the ego right out of the Heat. Two weeks after outcoaching Thibodeau, Heat coach Erik Spoelstra looked outwitted enough against Carlisle to make South Florida wonder how Pat Riley and Phil Jackson might co-exist in 2012.

All the focus on the Heat's failure obscured the reality that the Mavs were better. Mentally and physically, the Mavs exposed the Heat in ways the Bulls and Celtics couldn't. Apparently, the Heat even felt overmatched spiritually too, with a delusional LeBron James tweeting, "The Greater Man upstairs know when it's my time. Right now isn't."

A greater man would have just congratulated the Mavs and Nowitzki, who surpassed James in the Finals. James was such a fraud in fourth-quarter performances that his new nickname should be "Madoff." James' June swoon sent him plummeting below Kobe Bryant and Nowitzki on my list of the best active NBA players. He falls to the next tier with the likes of Rose and Kevin Durant and Carmelo Anthony and Dwight Howard and other guys still chasing a ring.

It takes more than singular talent to be the best, no matter how superior. It requires something hard to describe yet easy to notice, something special that always has been obvious about Nowitzki since his first few dribbles on American soil.

Dallas Mavericks' Dirk Nowitzki goes up for a rebound during the second half of Game 6 of the NBA Finals basketball game against the Miami Heat Sunday, June 12, 2011, in Miami. AP

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

ATHLETE, COACH, ORGANIZER

The three faces of Tony Rogolifoi

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

Tony Rogolifoi, left photo, receives the 2010 NMASA Coach of the Year award. Top, Tony Rogolifoi, third from left, joins CNMI baseball officials for a photo during the opening ceremony for the 2010 Micronesian Games in Palau.

More than 40 years and counting.

That is how long Antonio Rogolifoi has been involved in CNMI sports as an athlete, coach, and administrator. While his contemporaries have already called it quits, he isn't ready to throw in the towel just yet.

"I feel I can still contribute and help develop our younger players," said Rogolifoi, now president of the Basketball Association of Northern Mariana Islands and coach of Saipan Major League and Little League squads.

"I love working with young athletes. Coaching and organizing competitions for them are the best ways to pass on the skills I learned from other coaches. Coaching and holding competitions assure continuity in sports and I am honored to be part of that process," he added.

Rogolifoi's more than four-decade love affair with sports started with basketball before he switched to fast-pitch softball, volleyball, baseball, and finally golf. He breathes, eats, and drinks sports. It is his life and he takes pride in sharing it with others.

First love

Basketball caught Rogolifoi's passion in the early 1970s and though admittedly the toughest sport he has ever played, he said he never

PLETHORA OF ACCOLADES

- NMASA Hall of Famer (2004 inductee)
- Six MVP awards for basketball (1976-1986)
- NMASA Athlete of the Year, 1980
- Citizen of the Year, Rotary Club, 2007

lost interest in hard court action.

"I started playing in competitive leagues at 16 and organized tournaments for younger kids on the side," the Koblerville resident said.

Standing at 5'11", he played at the power forward and center spots. But with his shooting, dribbling, and playmaking skills, he could easily switch to the guard position.

His most memorable competition?

The inaugural Oceania Tournament in Fiji in 1981.

"Teams downplayed us because we're one of the smallest squads. We battled the taller and beefier Samoans, Fijians, and Australians and I was often pushed, banged, and elbowed. We beat the tall New Caledonia team, the first and only time we did that, and we also prevailed over Vanuatu. We proved ourselves in the tournament," Rogolifoi said.

The CNMI Team, which was then coached by Michael White, routed Vanuatu, 105-70, and slipped past New Caledonia, 99-93.

White still remembers playing with and against Rogolifoi soon after arriving in the CNMI in 1970. "He was quite young then, but it was easy to see that he was going to be a star on the court."

The two played together on the CNMI's first Pacific Games team in 1979. White soon retired as a player after that and coached Rogolifoi in the first Oceania Basketball Tournament in 1981.

"Tony was one of the best players ever to represent the CNMI. He had a great talent for finding open space on the floor, and a silky-smooth jump shot that was very accurate. He had great court sense, and seemed to know where the holes in the defense were. He was tough on defense, because he was quick and because he worked hard at getting good position," White said. "Although he wasn't the biggest guy on the court, he was a good rebounder because he had good size, and more important, he understood how to get position and block out. He was a great teammate, because he made other players better. He was a quick learner, and always ready to do whatever his coaches asked of him."

Rogolifoi claimed six MVP titles in a span of 10 years (1976-1986), making him the first recipient of the NMASA Athlete of the Year Award in 1980 and earning him the respect of his peers.

Rogolifoi also played fast-pitch softball and moved to baseball in the 1980s when the longest-running fastpitch league was suspended. When he tried volleyball and suited up for the CNMI Team in the 1979 South Pacific Games in Fiji, he learned the tricky short set and perfected the play with his Saipan teammates.

In the mid-'80s, he joined the Little League as an official and became president of the organization several times. More than 20 years later, he learned golf, which he plays on weekends to challenge himself.

Second calling

With age finally catching up, Rogolifoi slowed down on competitive leagues in basketball and baseball in the late '90s. That didn't stop him, however, from yet another sports-related mission—coaching.

He is a patient coach, believing that the best way to teach players new skills is to go step by step and correct their mistakes without raising one's voice.

"For me, shouting at a player when he makes a mistake is uncalled for. It lowers their esteem. Don't shout at kids; lend them a helping hand. Kids who are eager to learn appreciate your patience with them and they will reward you by following your instructions and respecting you," Rogolifoi said.

"I am challenged to see kids who lack talent but still come to practice and games to show they are interested to learn. It's a coach's dream to spend more time with these type of kids," he said.

It is also important for Rogolifoi to show a good example of sportsmanship. He does not want his players throwing balls or bats when they are upset with calls so he also keeps his temper in check, even when he is not happy with the officiating.

During the controversial semis loss of the CNMI National Baseball Team against Palau in the 2010 Micronesian Games, Rogolifoi respected the technical committee's decision and told his players to still compete in the remaining semis match.

"In any game, there's always a winner and a loser. Win or lose, you move on and look forward to the next game," said the Oceania-accredited Level 1 coach and umpire.

Third challenge

The NMASA Hall of Fame (2004 inductee) has already proven his worth as a player and coach, so he admits that being an administrator is a third challenge he is trying to hurdle.

"Playing in a competition and organizing one are two different things. When you're a player, you just show up at the game and you're good to go. Coordinating competitions is a tough job. In Little League alone, you're talking about four divisions and more than 20 teams. You're dealing with their coaches, managers, and their parents, too, so just imagine how challenging it is to make things work," Rogolifoi said.

Finding funds for a tournament is another challenge, especially nowadays when almost everyone is having a hard time making both ends meet.

"Players looks up to you for tournaments. After each event, they always ask you when is the next one. Before, in the Saipan Major League, we had the fall, spring, and summer leagues, but in the past few years, we had to squeeze it to one," said Rogolifoi, who received the Citizen of the Year award from the Rotary Club of Saipan in 2007 for his contribution to the CNMI sports community.

Rogolifoi, a former Division of Sports and Recreation director, almost forgot to say he is not being paid to do these things. He and most sports officials in the CNMI organize competitions voluntarily.

"We need more people to volunteer their time and effort to ensure that we will continue to have development programs for our youth. I've been doing these for more than 40 years and I plan to continue this volunteer service, how hard it may be."

From left, Tony Rogolifoi with his Rainbow Seabees teammates during the 1989 SML championships; pulling up for a jumper against Samoa during the 1985 Oceania Basketball Championship in Suva, Fiji; and umpiring in a Saipan Little League game in 2008.

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